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ABSTRACT

Freshman composition students were given six assignments designed to help them examine, analyze, and put their memories into context so that the students could use their memories to begin exploring and creating their own "truths" through language. Two essential types of memory were identified: (1) natural memory, memorizing word for word, which led to the sort of narrative account that the first-semester freshmen tended to write; and (2) artificial memory, which involved memorizing notions and images, then organizing them into cognitive schemata, thus encouraging more analytical writing. These two forms of memory proved interdependent, and the students needed to be aware of that. Effective writers used both forms of memory by cataloguing personal images with the one and analyzing, separating, and schematizing them with the other. Memory retrieval emerged as a crucial part of the process and appeared to be strongly related to stylistic production. Image retrieval seemed to be based not only on writers' knowledge of their ownership of the two types of memory and their ability to store both image and words, but also ultimately on their ability to transform the image into language. Style was stressed as an agent and inducer of memory, and students were encouraged to regard memory as an essential part of the inventive process. (Descriptions of six writing assignments are attached.) (AEW)

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Memory: A Step Toward Invention

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They come upon me suddenly, awkwardly. Perhaps it is the same for you. Someone says something, we see something, and all at once, a scene from our past is in clear focus. We may not have thought about this incident in years. Yet with the right cue, a door opens and we see old time if only fleetingly, see a moment that we leave all too soon without knowing how to return.

I've conducted no long-term empirical study to support the following remarks. My primary data comes from observing and talking with students about their writing in my own freshman composition courses and in Jim Corder's freshmen honors course. These assignments, which I can show you later if you wish, were designed to call up and test students' memories, and to ask them to speculate on how and why they remember. Perhaps after listening, you'll agree with me that in composition classes, we might well pull the faculty of memory from its classical role as a mnemonic techne into a modern position as part of the inventive process, indeed as representative of our selves, our value system, our method of categorization. In short, our memory

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serves as our pistis or proof for every thought or utterance we make. But how can we make memory work for us?

Our ignorance about the part memory plays in discourse production results from a limited understanding of all our ways of thinking. We should intentionally call forth memories, study the process by which they arrive, and apply the information to our system of categorization and its inherent values. To be sure, twentieth-century psychologists and some composition scholars (witness the work of Janet Emig, Linda Flower, John Hayes, and others) have reminded us of the importance of understanding long term and short term memory and the writer's goals and planning processes. Yet further research is needed. What particular strategies can a writer employ to call forth particular memories? Once she has called them forth, how may she best use them? Certainly it is not only by merely relating them in narrative form, but also by examining, analyzing, placing them into particular contexts, building particular rhetorical worlds for them to live in. In this way, the less-commonly-explored-common-places (of memories) might provide a place in the process of invention in which a writer could begin to explore and create her own "truths" through language.

In the series of "memory" assignments I mentioned earlier, I asked students in a freshman composition class to call forth various memories in response to an open-ended assignment and then to reflect on what they had done--their process, if you will.

Before writing their own version of an event that happened many years ago, they were asked to contact a relative or friend who was also present at the time in order that he or she might write about the event also. The students were asked not to talk about the event with their "writing partners" beyond reminding them of the incident. Within a week of writing their accounts, the students received their partners' versions, which they were then to compare with their own before writing a response on the nature of their memories.

Some students were surprised at their superior memories; others commented on their lack of attention to details. The following account by Sheri nicely captures the prevailing confusion:

> My brother Steve is a painfully prosaic, practical, precise and . . . pompous person. I do understand that these traits are common to law students and lawyers in general. Be that as it may, it still irks me that the boy can recall exactly what he had for lunch at some mediocre cafe thirteen years ago.

She continues by perceptively comparing her and her brother's accounts of the incident to their own characters, which she calls "the family stereotypes decreed for us when we were very young."

In her account of a visit to a doctor's office with her mother, Janet shows a similar awareness of detail and the importance of focus in writing.

> My mother made no mention of these details, but instead of my "outgoing" behavior in the waiting room and my

> "nonchalance" prior to the examination. My memories seem to be more sensory related: the throb of an earache, a soothing backrub, the loudness of the pediatrician's voice, and the expression on the nurse's face as she strapped me down to the lancing table.

In both cases the writer sought to retrieve what she remembered by supplying details. Sheri alliteratively enumerates characteristics of her brother and Janet descriptively catalogs sights and sounds. Another student, Vincent, found an equally stylistic way to recall and explain his pleasure with a Dr. Seuss book in a later assignment: "Another thing that captivated me was the fantastically fantastical illustrious illustrations, and the ridiculous rhymes to tickle us."

In a final assignment in which the students were asked to examine their previous papers and reflect on how their memory "works," Janet instinctively categorized her memories as "first time memories," "routine memories," and "JFK memories" or "memories of shock." From these categories, she concluded that incidents that are unique or new, repetitively experienced, or emotionally charged are the easiest to retrieve. Eileen and Vince chose metaphors to reveal their frustration of retrieving memories. Eileen was still "plagued by the feeling of trying to communicate something which eludes my grip, not unlike that of a wet bar of soap." And Vince called his memory an attic that he enjoyed rummaging around in. He commented that "the boxes are about half sorted, but someone got tired and instead of finishing the job, just threw the rest in one big box. We're quite likely

to find S's filed with M's."

Indeed, based on their responses, most of these students would find Vince's metaphor apt. They experienced difficulty in retrieving memories; when they did retrieve them, they were often dissatisfied with what they recognized as partial truths; but, if pressed, most would agree that the assignments revealed a great deal to them about the nature of truth, the difficulty in constructing a clear-cut, infallible argument, and the necessity of fluency in language to discover what one knows (and does not know) and to communicate both the breadth and limitations of that knowledge.

The two types of memory, mentioned by some early rhetoricians, memoria verborum and memoria rerum (or natural and artificial), parallel two types of writing and thinking our students often engage in. The former, memorizing word for word, by heart, is not unlike the narrative accounts that first semester freshmen are so fond of writing both in journals and personal experience essays. The latter, memorizing notions, images and organizing them into a cognitive schemata in such a way that they may be retrieved and fitted into a new context, resembles the type of writing we more often want from students--writing that explores, analyzes, connects, rebuilds. It is the type of memory, in fact, which might best be called structural memory. The emphasis in the first type of memory is on parts--individual words, in some cases. The emphasis in the

second type of memory is on the whole image or framework of images.

Both types of memory serve a valuable function, although we seem to praise one more than the other. We praise the writer who can make the connections in her writing, even though she may have forgotten where the substance of these connections came from. Without the meticulous recording of detail, she cannot preserve the image in an individual, new way. These two forms of memory are interdependent, and our students need to be aware of this.

The effective writer does not memorize or reproduce a cliched description of the founders of our country or the flag, for a July 4th celebration article. Instead, she utilizes both forms of "memory," by cataloguing personal images with the one and analyzing, separating, schematizing them with the other. Each time she retrieves knowledge from this mental framework of images, however, she returns to the detailing, the well-tuned phrase which solidifies the image in her and her listeners' minds.

In addition to examining the types of memory, then, there arises the necessity of learning how to retrieve these images. A friend of mine assures me that we think in images. That may be so. Yet I don't know what I know until I have retrieved this image by transforming it into language. Memory retrieval, then, appears to be strongly related to stylistic production. The reason we are prompted to continue writing is that we are pleased

by what we hear. By using rhetorical techniques (whether our students recognize them as such) such as amplification, enumeration, and so forth, we create what we know sounds right. If, as readers, we are encouraged to read on after completing a sentence like the following--"The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity" (120)--consider how much more willing the writer who wrote that sentence would be to continue writing. That would not necessarily be the case if the sentence had been something more like: The problem with people today is that they think they know it all, know it better than anyone else does or ever has, and can get by on their own.

The way something sounds can truly make it memorable. Yet memoria verborum, the word for word "knowledge" of a text is a double-edged sword. It serves the writer in two ways. For example, if she has the following passage of Pope's committed to her heart--"Words are like leaves and where they most abound,/Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found"(ll 309-310, 153)--she has in her possession not only the finely wrought style and arrangement of words to recall, but the striking image to schematize as well. In either case, retrieving the image seems to be based upon not only the writer's knowledge of her ownership of the two types of memory and her ability to effectively store both image and words, but ultimately her ability to transform the

image into language. While most writers would not choose to improve upon Pope's couplet, they would agree that its felicitous phrasing caused it to be more easily retrievable.

Perhaps an example from a freshman paper would help clarify the matter. Based on his coursework in child psychology, Joel wanted to prove his assertion that the perception of a painful event varied from parent to child. The case studies he found in his book weren't falling into place, so I suggested he provide an example of his own.

He sat in my office thinking a bit and then began to write . . . and write . . . and write. He began: "Awkwardly shy, painfully aware, shuddering against my cold, desensitized mother, I was whisked through three sets of doors in a matter of minutes. . . "

The entire passage was not so embellished, but the many parts that were had been produced (as had been the majority of the passage) rapidly. This young man had not formally studied rhetorical tropes and figures. He had been in a class in which examples of good writing were praised and analyzed in a non-technical way. These students had searched and found vibrant, vital language, noted their findings in journals, and discussed them as they contributed to the whole.

And after the conference, I talked with Joel about how the way he wrote about the incident helped him remember what he didn't know he knew. Does that sound funny? Joel surely

remembered his hospital experience. He had images of all sorts. He merely could have recounted the story in a journalistic format. But he didn't. And the result was a creation of knowledge in a memory that emerged through a stylistic use of language. Not surprising when we remember Cicero's comments about how everyday, petty things are not remembered as well as something exceptionally seen or heard.

I said in my title that memory is a step toward invention. How is that step made? I suggest that it is made with style. Recall that in the section on memory in the Ad Herennium, the writer calls memory the "treasure-house of the ideas supplied by Invention to the guardian of all parts of rhetoric, the Memory" (205). For my purposes, I am bothered by only one word of this definition: the preposition "by," for I think that today memory may be the "treasure-house of the ideas supplied to Invention by style."

While style is related to the product of Invention, it seems to me that it also may aid the process in a way we don't often think about: an agent and inducer of memory, a friend to our cognitive schemata, a way toward the commonplaces that for our students may not be so common anymore.

Calling forth our memories through language or style; analyzing those memories in order to understand what we believe, what we need to say, and how best to say it; becoming aware of how we think when producing discourse--these activities are not

beyond us or our college writers.

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Memory Assignment Number 1

Most families have favorite stories, be they about good experiences or painful ones. You have had a number of experiences in your life, but I don't want you to select the one that is always told around the holiday dinner table. Instead, I want you to recall a childhood experience that you haven't thought about in a while, yet one in which more than just one person was involved (For instance, don't tell about the time you were hiking alone and nearly fell off a cliff. . .). Before you start writing about this experience, call one (or more, if you wish) of the people (family members are probably more willing to help) who was present for the experience and ask him or her to write about it also. IMPORTANT: DON'T GIVE ANY MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE THAN IS NECESSARY TO REMIND YOUR HELPER OF THE PARTICULAR EVENT OF WHICH YOU ARE SPEAKING. Ask this person to send his or her written recollection (about two or three pages) to you AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. You will, of course, be comparing your version with the other person's, so it is important not to talk about the incident until both of you have completed the written record. A rough draft of your version will be due next class session. Hopefully the mail system will provide you with your "alternate text" by early next week.

Memory Assignment Number 2

For this assignment, I would like you to recall a song you learned (to sing) as a child, a song you often heard on the radio (perhaps a favorite of older cousins or your parents), and a song you know pretty well and associate with a particular memory (in recent years). Why did you remember each of the songs? If you memorized or know the song "by heart" what was your process (what, anyway, does learning something "by heart" mean??? what are the connotations there?)? What associations come to mind with each song?

Based on your written responses to the above questions (just number separate sheets of paper and handwrite a few paragraphs of response to each question), what qualities make a song memorable to you? What does the fact you remembered these particular songs reveal about you? From what you now perhaps know about yourself, what type of song would you write for yourself? The last three questions in this paragraph deserve considerable attention in your composition. They cannot be effectively answered, however, without carefully working out the questions posed in paragraph one.

Memory Assignment 3

Now that you have another written text of your memory (albeit, a memory from a different perspective), you should carefully examine both "texts," marking them and keeping track of their similarities and differences. What sorts of details did you and your alternate source include/omit? How did the other person choose to tell the story (where did he/she begin, end, stand in relationship to other characters, place you)? In your composition you may briefly report on the most important discrepancies or concurances, differences or similarities in the two texts. More importantly, however, you should focus on what your observations tell you about yourself, your assistant reporter, and the nature of truth in general. Please staple both narrative texts, your charts, graphs, notes, rough drafts, etc. in an orderly fashion to the back of your composition.

Memory Assignment Number 4

As a younger person, you no doubt had a favorite book. This book you never grew tired of, and perhaps became so wrapped up in it that you were oblivious to everything else that was going on around you. Please find that text (juvenile section in basement of library) and reread it or a portion of it. In the process of your reading, try to determine what is present that provides that magic moment of leaving this "place" and going to that one (feel free to quote brief sections to support your contentions). I have some ideas--but no right answers. I'd really like to see what you can find. Don't take the easy way out by merely suggesting that it is imaginative characters, far-away places, or exciting plot. Look closer and ask why that was the reason (for you, for others). Do those things still hold your attention? Can they be done at a different level? Do you know how to do them? What can we learn for our own writing from what these writers have done? Feel free to begin this in first person narrative style.

Memory Assignment Number 5

From several different angles, sketch and then describe (this will involve several sheets of drawing/typewriter and notebook paper) a particular place you have not visited in several years. Now go revisit this place. Compare and contrast your "texts" with the "actual" product. What are the differences/similarities? How are they important or not important? In your discussion, focus on what this tells you about the mind's ability to reorganize and recreate (using the material you've gathered as well as other "stuff" for supporting data). As always, staple the "goodies" on back.

NOTE: If visiting a place from the past poses a problem (love that alliteration!) it is okay to work with a place here in Fort Worth that you've been to (but not recently).

Memory Assignment Number 6

Based on your work up to now, do you have a particular

process of categorization of experience? (Look back over your earlier essays for clues.) What does all this suggest about your value system? What is important (unimportant) to you in a given situation?